Ventura, Ojai, and Santa Barbara County Realtors donate $650K in aid to wildfire victims

A month after the U.S. Forest Service announced an end to the Thomas Fire, a California wildfire that scorched 281,893 acres of land in Southern California, the Ventura County Coastal Association of Realtors, the Santa Barbara Association of Realtors and the Ojai Valley Board of Realtors have begun distributing $650,000 in aid to hundreds of families who lost their homes.

The associations received the $150,000 from California Association of Realtors Housing Affordability Fund and $650,000 from the National Association of Realtors' Realtor's Relief Foundation to assist wildfire and Montecito Debris Flow victims.

VCCAR, SBAR, and OVBR began distributing checks in July and said families will receive as much as $3,000 to help cover one month's rent or mortgage payments, according to a report by the *Ventura County Star*.

"Every little bit counts, and a lot of these people either did not have insurance or got very small stipends from some organizations," VCCAR Board of Directors member Sher Heard told the *Star*. "There were little bits coming in here and there, but this was a way to help pay a whole month (of rent) that you did not need to worry about."

Matt Capritto

Victims in Ventura and Santa Paula received $160,000 in aid, while fire victims in the Ojai area received about $16,000, according to a press release by VCCAR. People affected by the Thomas Fire and the Montecito Debris Flow in Santa Barbara County have received about $113,000.

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To date, nearly $300,000 has been distributed or allocated, with the three associations continuing to process applications. The three associations hope to distribute all the funds by early September, said VCCAR in an emailed statement.

VCCAR President Matt Capritto told Inman that he’s proud of the work the associations have done, but that much more is needed to fulfill the demand.

“The need far surpassed our expectations, and the word has gotten out because realtors have hit the ground and talked to so many people,” he said, noting that it would take at least $460,000 to just to help all 200 Ventura residents who have applied to date.

Capritto says the associations are planning to request more funds from CAR and NAR so they can help more victims, but in the meantime, they’re using their influence to educate residents about having adequate home insurance.

“I think you have to be prepared in the same way you have to be prepared for an earthquake,” he said. “It’s more of an individual thing, so what I’ve done as a president is every time I’ve gone out and spoken, I’ve spoken about checking your insurance to make sure that it’s up to date.”

Capritto says his beachside community is more likely to experience another earthquake before they experience another fire of this magnitude, which he said was caused by three years of drought and unusually fierce Santa Ana winds.

“But it’s really a phenomenon. In all the years I’ve lived here, never have I seen anything like this [fire],” he added. “This was a very unique fire in the fact that it took everyone off guard. We’re more likely to have an earthquake somewhere down the road.”

But no matter what happens, Capritto says Ventura County Realtors are ready to step up and support their community.

“I just have to say that I’m proud of the community effort, and what we’ve done outreach-wise, because so many people were affected,” he said. “It’s a close-knit, small community and we’re ready to be proactive.”

Email Marian McPherson.

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